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RELEASED IN PART
B1, 1.4(D)

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EXDIS NOFORN TOPOL 120019; PLS PASS U/S PICKERING

FOLLOWING CARACAS 3501 DTD 23 NOV SENT ACTION
STATE RPTD FOR UR INFO.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003501

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FOR P - UNDERSECRETARY PICKERING AND A/S ROMERO FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/25/08

TAGS: PGOV, VE

SUBJECT: THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS TWO WEEKS OUT: NOT AT ALL OVER
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CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR JOHN F. MAISTO. REASON: 1.5 (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE DECEMBER 6 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, THE RACE HAS COME DOWN TO TWO MEN: HUGO CHAVEZ FRIAS AND HENRIQUE SALAS ROMER. BOTH CANDIDATES REPRESENT A DRAMATIC BREAK FROM PAST POLITICS AND CARRY WITH THEM THE EXPECTATIONS OF MANY VOTERS FOR SIGNIFICANT, POSITIVE CHANGE IN THE GOVERNANCE OF VENEZUELA. ONE OR BOTH OF THE TRADITIONAL PARTIES, WITH THEIR ECLIPSED CANDIDATES, COULD PLAY A SPOILER ROLE BY SPLITTING THE ANTI-CHAVEZ VOTE, THUS ENSURING A CHAVEZ VICTORY. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) BOTH HUGO CHAVEZ AND HENRIQUE SALAS HAVE ESCHEWED TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND HAVE RUN THEIR CAMPAIGNS IN DISTINCT AND INNOVATIVE FASHIONS. HUGO CHAVEZ, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] HAS USED HIS FAILED 1992 COUP ATTEMPT, A TWO-YEAR PRISON TERM, [REDACTED] TO CREATE A PUBLIC

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE EXDIS NOFORN
REVIEW AUTHORITY: OSCAR J OLSON CONFIDENTIAL
CLASSIFICATION: CONFIDENTIAL REASON: 1.4(D)
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PERSONA WHICH INCORPORATES POPULAR DESIRE FOR RADICAL CHANGE, DEEP-SEATED RESENTMENT TOWARDS OLD-LINE POLITICIANS, AND VENGEANCE. FORGING AN EFFERVESCENT COALITION OF LEFTIST AND RIGHTIST FRINGES (TRADITIONALLY MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN VENEZUELAN POLITICS), BARRIO-DWELLERS, ANXIOUS MEMBERS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS, AND OPPORTUNISTIC PRIVATE SECTOR ELITES, CHAVEZ QUICKLY STAKED OUT A COMMANDING LEAD IN THE POLLS. COMBINING SOFT CAMPAIGNING AIMED AT BUSINESSMEN, THE CHURCH, AND FRIGHTENED MEMBERS OF THE ESTABLISHMENT, WITH HARD CAMPAIGNING AIMED AT VENEZUELA'S ECONOMICALLY BATTERED POPULAR CLASSES, CHAVEZ HAS REVITALIZED POPULIST POLITICS AND LEFT HIS TRADITIONAL OPPONENTS OPEN-MOUTHED AND DEFENSELESS.

3. (C) HENRIQUE SALAS ROMER IS AN EXPERIENCED AND SUCCESSFUL GOVERNOR WHO BUILT A DYNASTY IN HIS HOME STATE OF CARABOBO. EXPELLED FROM THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (COPEI), HE USED HIS TWO
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TERMS AS GOVERNOR TO DRIVE COPEI AND THE DEMOCRATIC ACTION PARTY (AD) FROM CARABOBO, END CORRUPTION IN STATE ENTITIES (E.G. SUCH AS THE IMPORTANT PORT OF PUERTO CABELLO), AND IMPROVE DRAMATICALLY STATE SERVICES. ORIGINALLY DISMISSED BY THE TRADITIONAL PARTIES AS AN UNKNOWN WITH NO NATIONAL ORGANIZATION, HE HAS PARLAYED HIS REPUTATION AS A GOOD GOVERNOR, OPEN DISDAIN FOR THE TRADITIONAL PARTIES, AND A TOUGH, AUTOCRATIC PERSONALITY INTO A STEADY RISE WHICH HAS BROUGHT HIM ONLY A FEW PERCENTAGE POINTS FROM HUGO CHAVEZ. SKILLFUL USE OF THE MEDIA, STEADY ORGANIZATIONAL WORK AT THE STATE AND GRASS ROOTS LEVELS, GROWING SUPPORT FROM THE MIDDLE CLASS, AND THE MISSTEPS OF COPEI CANDIDATE IRENE SAEZ HAVE THRUST SALAS INTO THE ROLE HE ANTICIPATED WHEN HE BEGAN HIS CAMPAIGN: THE SAME ALTERNATIVE TO HUGO CHAVEZ. HE TOLD THE NATION THE NIGHT OF THE NOVEMBER 8 REGIONAL ELECTIONS, "VENEZUELA FACES TWO CHOICES: THE PROMISE OF RADICAL, PEACEFUL CHANGE BASED ON MY PROVEN RECORD OF GOVERNMENT, OR THE VIOLENCE AND CHAOS OF AN ADVENTURER WHO WOULD MILITARIZE THE GOVERNMENT."

4. (C) THE CAMPAIGNS OF BOTH CANDIDATES HAVE TAKEN PLACE WITHIN A VOLATILE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT CHARACTERIZED BY SUCCESSIVE WAVES OF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR DIFFERENT CANDIDATES AS VENEZUELAN VOTERS SEARCH FOR A LEADER TO TAKE THEM INTO THE NEXT CENTURY. POLLING DATA INDICATES THAT CHAVEZ'S WAVE OF SUPPORT HAS CRESTED, WHILE THAT OF SALAS IS STILL RISING. BUT SALAS HAS NOT CAUGHT CHAVEZ YET, AND HE ONLY HAS TWO WEEKS IN WHICH TO DO IT.

5. (C) WHETHER OR NOT SALAS CAN CATCH CHAVEZ BEFORE THE DECEMBER 6 VOTE DEPENDS ON SEVERAL FACTORS OUTSIDE OF HIS CONTROL:

-- TURNOUT. FIFTY-FIVE PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE VOTED ON NOVEMBER 8. A STRONG MAJORITY VOTED FOR PARTIES WHICH ARE ANTI-
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CHAVEZ. CHAVEZ WAS DISAPPOINTED IN THE TURNOUT, AND PROMISED THAT
THE VOTE FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION WOULD BE MASSIVE. A
SIGNIFICANTLY LARGER TURNOUT WOULD FAVOR CHAVEZ.

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-- TRADITIONAL PARTIES. AD AND COPEI COULD PLAY THE SPOILER IN
THIS ELECTION. BOTH HAVE INDICATED THEIR REJECTION OF CHAVEZ AND
SALAS. ALTHOUGH POLLS INDICATE THAT MANY VOTERS WILL DESERT THESE
PARTIES IN THE DECEMBER 6 ELECTIONS--HAVING CAST THEIR BALLOTS FOR
THE PARTIES ON NOVEMBER 8--AD CANDIDATE LUIS ALFARO INSISTS THAT AD
AND COPEI VOTERS WILL NOT VOTE FOR SALAS. IF THESE TWO PARTIES,
BEHIND AN ALFARO CANDIDACY OR ON THEIR OWN, ARE ABLE TO HANG ON TO
A SIGNIFICANT PERCENTAGE OF THEIR VOTERS, THEN THE ANTI-CHAVEZ VOTE
WILL BE SPLIT AND CHAVEZ WILL WIN.

-- IRENE. THE FORMER MISS UNIVERSE IS A SPENT CANDIDATE. HER
COALITION'S POOR SHOWING IN THE NOVEMBER 8 ELECTIONS LEFT NO DOUBT
THAT SHE COULD NOT WIN THIS ELECTION. HOWEVER, SHE IS STILL
BELOVED BY MANY AND INFLUENTIAL. AD AND COPEI CURRENTLY ARE
INVOLVED IN UNSEEMLY MACHINATIONS OVER HER POLITICAL CARCASS,
HOPING TO PUSH HER ASIDE IN FAVOR OF ALFARO. HOWEVER, IRENE HAS

HER OWN POLITICAL FUTURE TO THINK OF, AND IS LOOKING FOR A WAY TO
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MAKE A POSITIVE AND DIGNIFIED EXIT. SHE HAS TAKEN TO HEART THE
ACTIONS OF NOEMI SANIN IN THE COLOMBIAN ELECTIONS, AND COULD BRING
HERSELF TO SUPPORT SALAS.

6. (C) IF THE ELECTION WERE HELD TODAY, CHAVEZ WOULD WIN.
HOWEVER, THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT IS STILL SUFFICIENTLY VOLATILE
THAT THE VOTE ON DECEMBER 6 IS TOO CLOSE TO CALL.

7. (C) WHAT CAN BE CALLED, HOWEVER, IS A SMOOTH, CLEAN ELECTION.
WHILE THE NOVEMBER 8 VOTE WAS PLAGUED WITH ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS,
PATIENT AND PEACEFUL VOTERS ENSURED A TRANQUIL ELECTION AND A
TRANSPARENT RESULT. THE NATIONAL ELECTORAL COUNCIL (CNE) HAS HAD
SEVERAL WEEKS TO WORK ON ITS ORGANIZATIONAL DEFICIENCIES,
ESPECIALLY LAYOUT OF VOTING CENTERS, THE NEED TO OPEN ON TIME, AND
BETTER TRAINED TECHNICIANS FOR THE VOTE-COUNTING MACHINES. THE
EXPERIENCE GAINED ON NOVEMBER 8, ADDITIONAL TRAINING, PRACTICED

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VOTERS, AND A SINGLE BALLOT, SHOULD MAKE THE DECEMBER 6 VOTE A SMOOTH ONE. FURTHERMORE, THE PROFESSIONALISM DISPLAYED BY THE ARMED FORCES ON NOVEMBER 8 AUGURS WELL FOR ITS ABILITY TO MANAGE EVEN GREATER VOTER TURNOUT.

8. (C) THE ADDITION OF LARGE, HIGH-PROFILE INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER DELEGATIONS ALSO PROVIDES AN IMPORTANT CONFIDENCE BUILDING AND TRANQUILIZING EFFECT. IT BUILDS CONFIDENCE THAT THE VOTING SYSTEM WILL FUNCTION IN A TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE FASHION. IT TRANQUILIZES IN THAT LOSING CANDIDATES WILL FIND THEMSELVES UNDER DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE TO ACCEPT THE RESULTS OF THE ELECTIONS. WHILE THIS DOES NOT COMPLETELY RULE OUT THE POSSIBILITY OF DISTURBANCES, ESPECIALLY IN THE EVENT OF A CLOSE VOTE COUNT, IT GIVES THE GOVERNMENT ADDED SUPPORT TO ENSURE THAT CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES AND GUARANTEES ARE RESPECTED.

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9. (C) THE RESULT IS THAT THE ELECTORAL PROCESS SEEMS ON TRACK, AND THE VENEZUELAN PEOPLE ARE NEARLY POISED TO MAKE THEIR CHOICE BETWEEN HUGO CHAVEZ FRIAS AND HENRIQUE SALAS ROMER. WHATEVER THEIR CHOICE, IT WILL BE A DEMOCRATIC ONE, AND SHOULD MAKE CLEAR TO ALL THAT VENEZUELAN BELIEVE THAT SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL CHANGE CAN COME ABOUT THROUGH DEMOCRATIC, CONSTITUTIONAL MEANS, AND, WHATEVER THEIR CHOICE, POST DECEMBER 8 THE ISSUE THAT WILL BEDEVIL VENEZUELAN OF ALL POLITICAL STRIPES WILL BE HOW TO MARRY THAT CHANGE WITH GOVERNABILITY.

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